

Castlemaine Naturalist

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Bush Stone Curlew photo-Noel Young

Decline of bush birds in North Central Victoria

(a summary of the Ockham's Razor transcript - Radio National, 30th Sept. 2007)

*I thought people might be interested in the following. I find it very disturbing –
Tony Morton*

In 1974 Sue Turner's parents (not our Sue!) bought a place in the 'grey box woodlands of north central Victoria', mainly because of the prolific bird life. Sue has kept a record of the birds seen over 30 years of observation on frequent visits. She has noticed a 'reduction in Cuckoos and a worrying decline in Eastern Yellow Robins'. She hasn't seen a Fan-tailed Cuckoo since 2005, a Pallid Cuckoo since 2000, a Black-eared Cuckoo since 1993. Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo is now rare. Her explanation of the Black-eared Cuckoo's demise is that they parasitised the nest of the Speckled Warbler, once common at her parents' place, but she hasn't seen a Speckled Warbler there since 1999.

Not only are Eastern Yellow Robins in decline, the Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters have disappeared and so have the Southern Scrub-robins (this last species since the DSE burnt the mallee scrub where they had been common, so an elderly local birder told her) Another local naturalist told her that where he could find 18 or 19 nests in an afternoon in the mallee, he was now lucky to find one. Sue remembers that though she used to photograph many nests of 16 or so species she lists, the last one she remembers photographing was a Mistletoe Bird's in January 1998.

Other birds she mentions that were once common but now seem to be in decline are: Hooded Robins, Diamond Firetails, Southern Whiteface, Jacky Winters, Black-chinned Honeyeaters and Crested Bellbirds. She wonders if the less fussy Red-browed Finches are displacing Diamond Firetails at her parents' place. Where, many years ago, her father and she counted 17 species of honeyeater at a nearby waterhole, today she sees three or four.

While the farms and State Forest that surround her land still look very much the same as ever, she wonders whether land degradation further afield makes bird populations at her parents' place no longer viable as there are no nearby populations to replace lost birds or provide new blood. She remembers the birder Roy Wheeler and his twitch of 600 species in one year (without modern communications then, of course) and remarks that he wouldn't do it today.

SEANA Autumn Campout at Naracoorte – March 8-10, '08

Geraldine and Geoff Harris

On Friday evening we met in the coolness of Blanche Cave for a welcome and introduction to the district by the Mayor followed by an intriguing illustrated talk about "The Disputed Country" along the SA border by the farmer/adventurer/map-maker John Deckett, author of a book of the same name and owner of Wesmaps of Nhill.

On Saturday morning nine of us donned knee pads, orange overalls and helmets and descended into the Stick-Tomato Cave to have a go at adventure caving. We crawled and wriggled and climbed and slid through this cave under the expert supervision of Amy, our guide. While the temperature is constant and cool in the caves I admit to a few periods of feeling quite hot and sweaty as we underwent some of the "introductory" exercises. We certainly had a better appreciation of the exploration involved when adventurers negotiated obscure openings that led to more and more caves being discovered.

On Saturday afternoon, after a brief explanation of the progressive discovery of new caves and the extent of the whole cave system to date, and the significance of the quite recently discovered fossil sites, we were very happy to escape the searing sun and descend into the World Heritage listed Fossil Cave. The vertebrate fossil material found in the cave provides a continuous record dating back perhaps 500,000 years. The animals have accidentally fallen down shafts or openings and been unable to get out.

After dinner we watched, through the use of infra-red cameras, Southern Bent-wing Bats waking deep down in the caves in preparation for their feeding flights outside. And, when it was time, we walked down to a cave opening and watched as the bats emerged. A specially prepared bat trap yielded a couple of small bats that provided us with a close-up live view of these fascinating little creatures.

On Sunday we headed out to learn about the threatened south eastern Red-tailed Black Cockatoos that feed on the Bulokes in the area. We visited the Mullinger Swamp Conservation Area, a popular swimming and picnic area where people once used the large burnt out trunk of a River Red Gum (11.6 m around) as a change room and where a separate hole was used to swim sheep to clean their fleeces before shearing. The swamp dried up in 1967.

We visited the 144sq homestead and once 13-stand shearing shed at "Benyeo" station. Both were built of ironstone by the Chinese on their way from Robe to the goldfields in Victoria in the mid 1800s. The 45,000 acre property is now reduced to 6000 acres. We visited a sink-hole on the property where an area up to 100 acres would regularly flood to a depth of one to two metres but where, every five years or so, the water would suddenly disappear down this hole with a great roar and swirl, like going down a plug hole. The farmer said the sides were straight and water could be seen flowing 60ft below. 1965 was the last time this happened.

We drove through the Tallagera Scrub to look at the different effects on revegetation of a controlled "cool" burn and a "hot" burn that got out of control destroying the upper canopy that Red-tailed Black Cockatoos (RTBC) depend on and that can take up to 10 years to repair. On the edge of the scrub we looked at RTBC nesting boxes (large natural hollow branches) attached to unused electricity poles and large dead trees. They are very shy nesters and one sign of occupancy is the chewed rim of the nesting box where the debris falls into the box as nesting material.

Our last stop for the day was at a farm where some of the best Buloke feed trees in the district occur. The young farmer had placed a portion of his land under a Trust for Nature covenant and the remaining Buloke area will be rotationally grazed one week at a time about four times a year.

Martine who studied Bulokes as a food source for RTBC told us that her research has shown that food availability is the primary limitation on RTBC numbers. The RTBC is dependant on Bulokes for feeding for approximately two months of the year in late summer / early autumn and then they move to areas of Brown Stringybark where they will feed for the other 10 months. They prefer the bigger individual Buloke trees to the suckers because they have the best fruit and also provide the most support for these large birds as they land to feed. They hold the cones in one claw, bite off the top of the cone and eat the seeds in whorls and normally spend 65% of their day feeding and up to 80% in dry periods.

Bulokes are slow growing and do not grow well from seed or by direct seeding. They are particularly threatened because they grow in good soil that is suitable for cropping, they are easily knocked down and a more recent threat is the trend towards centre pivot irrigation and the consequent removal of large isolated trees (that produce the most fruit). Protecting and planting trees is important. Endeavours are being made to maintain the endangered population and increase numbers to a sustainable level of 750 breeding pairs. RTBC take three years to mature and mate for life or until their partner dies.

Despite recent sightings, it seemed we had probably missed the RTBCs by about a week. However we did see two pairs of Bush Stone Curlews which was very exciting!

On Sunday evening in Blanche Cave we learned about "Water in the South-east of SA." Underground water is the main water source with bores reaching into the unconfined aquifers and more recently into the confined (deeper) aquifers. Farmers are being encouraged to be more careful with water and irrigation water is now being metered. Some of the areas of concern include evaporation from central pivots used during the day, increased salinity, the effect of plantation forests on recharge, severe pollution from dairy farming and a lowering of the water table.

Thanks to the efforts of the Lucindale/ Naracoorte members we had a very interesting (although hot) time and look forward to the next SEANA gathering at Healesville this Spring. Why don't you come along too?

At the committee meeting it was relayed that Ern Perkins is to continue as web master for the SEANA website but would prefer someone else to take his place on the SEANA Committee. A vote of thanks was expressed for his time on the committee. Thank you Ern, from members of the CFNC.

Further Threat to Remnant Vegetation - Geraldine Harris

We recently attended a funeral at the Sutton Grange cemetery and noticed a good crop of native grasses growing within the cemetery boundary. The native vegetation was very evident because of the contrast with surrounding farm paddocks that were bereft of any green growth at all. At the funeral we were alarmed to hear about a new practice where Bendigo and city people are buying plots in small country cemeteries because they are cheaper. Having survived for many years within the cemetery these reserves of important remnant vegetation are under threat yet again - this time by the cost of burials.

Observations

- ◆ In the last couple of days, the Choughs at Blakeley rd., after being around for several weeks, seem to have moved on. They gave our magpie flock (now only 3 birds as far as I can see) a hard time, isolating one bird and harassing it, but the Magpies soon learnt to keep together. A regular "war" developed at times, then they'd all settle to feeding again, with both flocks keeping clear of each other – Rita Mills
- ◆ Juvenile Sparrowhawk with a freshly killed Blackbird – Penny Garnett
- ◆ Four Magpies in the yard, three watching the fourth 'playing dead' – Natalie de Maccus
- ◆ Where-ever I've been, there seems to be a very good flowering of Box Mistletoe (*Amyema miquellii*) all over the district this year – Rita Mills
- ◆ I predict that Swift Parrots will arrive here in numbers this year because of the blossom patterns – Gary Cheers
- ◆ There seems to be very few European wasps around this summer -Tony Morton
- ◆ Tasmania is infested with Bumble Bees – Chris Morris
- ◆ Another flock of White Ibis (about 20) in the Botanical Gardens on Saturday 22nd – George Broadway.
- ◆ An immature male Darter on Lake Joanna 24th Mar – Noel Young
- ◆ Striated Pardalotes checking out the nest boxes – Denis Hurley
- ◆ Flock of about 35 Magpies heading SW over Castlemaine – Rita Mills

For Early Risers – George Broadway

Early risers will see an interesting sight in the eastern sky, low down ahead of the sun, namely the planets Venus and Mercury close together. Best time to view is between 6.30 and 7.00, after that Mercury tends to fade ahead of the rising sun. At the same time, Jupiter is almost overhead.

The Night Shift -- Tony Morton

On the nocturnal habits of those dreaded lepidopterophagous birds, the White-browed Scrubwren and the Fairy-wren - I have a bright MV light on outside occasionally to attract moths, and I go out from time to time to see what has come along. Whenever I go out, there are half-a-dozen of these LBJs having a feast! I can't swear to their presence at the light between midnight and five a.m., but at all other times of night they flutter slowly away from me into the shrubs, weighed down by their greed. I wonder what rarities I've missed by not being there all the time!

Cocos Keeling and Christmas Islands - Nigel Harland

It was late January, my least favourite time for living in central Victoria. I discovered an opportunity to visit Cocos Keeling and Christmas Islands, which would give me a stopover in Perth to see my daughter. I had been to Christmas Island before – mainly to see the annual crab migration. The trip began in late February, so arrangements had to be made quickly. I left Melbourne on 22nd February and spent a couple of non-birding days with my daughter in Fremantle before checking in at Perth International airport for the trip north west. I don't totally understand why the flight leaves from the International airport when it is going only to Australian territory, particularly when I want to add birds to my Australian list! There had been cyclones in the area and we were told that if we couldn't land then Indonesia would be our destination. However, we landed easily at Christmas Island on our way to Cocos Keeling.

Four of us found our way out of the transit lounge and walked around the car park, finding several species. Eventually we were rounded up by airport staff and told we should have boarded the plane and it was waiting for us! Another hour and we were on Cocos Keeling – West Island, which was to be our home for the next four days. It is a highly civilised place, the only motel is about 50 metres from the airport and there are only two flights a week. We checked in, collected a hire car and were off on an exploratory tour of West Island. There were lots of Green Junglefowl on the side of the roads. Looks like a sophisticated chook, but it's on the list, so it was my first tick. There were also lots of White-breasted Waterhen – a little more skittish, but highly visible. These birds arrived from places north in the last ten years or so and have taken a liking to the habitat. Apart from these, there seemed to be few birds on the island. A beer at the local pub and dinner at the motel set us up well for an early start the next day.

Generally speaking there are very few species of birds on the islands, but I did manage to tick a Western Reef Egret, Pintail Snipe and Saundier's Tern, giving me four ticks in four days. We managed to visit several of the other islands, but missed out on North Keeling (and therefore the rarely seen Lesser Noddy) because a Chinese ship had been stuck on one of the reefs and all local boats were being used in the rescue mission. The population is mainly Malay and the reason for its continued existence is a little difficult to determine. Tourism plays a part, but it is hard to see it as a major contributor to the local economy. Anyway, we had a great time there – perhaps a day too long, before making the hour flight back to Christmas Island.

Arriving before lunchtime, we picked up vehicles and headed straight to the southern end of the island to find the Red-collared Dove which had been seen there a few weeks earlier. This bird has only been seen in Australia once before, but no luck this time. On the way there, we realised that there are a lot more birds on Christmas Island than there were on Cocos Keeling. Lots of Christmas Island Frigatebirds and Greater Frigatebirds. Exquisite Golden Bosunbirds and Red-tailed Tropicbirds wheeling over the ocean and onshore. We managed to find a Variable Goshawk on the way back. Orientation of the island and a few endemics filled the afternoon. After dinner we managed to track down a Christmas Island Hawk-Owl near the rubbish tip.

Next day we set off for the rubbish tip again – some great birds have been seen here. No luck initially, but suddenly we flushed two herons. One flew to the top of a distant tree and was identified as a Javan Pond Heron – only the second record for Australia – but the second bird vanished. The birds were feeding in a stretch of water caused by recent rains, so we decided to come back later and creep up on it (or them). No luck, so I volunteered to stay well hidden while the others went to lunch. It was unbearably hot and I crawled into a position where I could see the water and hopefully where the bird couldn't see me. Camera and binoculars at the ready, I waited. Mad dogs and Englishmen!! About half an hour later a heron reappeared and spent about five minutes in view. I got some reasonable photos from the distant position and realised this bird wasn't the Javan Pond Heron. Later views of the pictures confirmed it to be a Chinese Pond Heron – another second sighting for Australia. Eventually a cat scared it away.

On our way home late one afternoon we saw a bird on the roadside, which looked like a Bittern. We stopped and were amazed to find a lone Cinnamon Bittern – again a second record for Australia, and the first one was dead! Got lots of really good photos and the dinner at a local restaurant was a celebration.

Another stop on the roadside to look at a group of Common Noddies revealed a few Noddies which were noticeably smaller than the others. Further investigation revealed that they were Lesser Noddies – the birds we had missed seeing on North Keeling Island. A new record for Christmas Island and a fitting conclusion to the trip. One person on the trip managed to see thirty new species. I managed eight, which was double my expectation and some of those were real rarities. We might have missed the Red-collared Dove, but that can wait for another day!

Martin Scuffins – The Hawk and the Hunter

Geraldine Harris

From notes taken at Bendigo Field Naturalist Meeting 9/8/06 and Newstead Landcare Meeting 13/3/08.

After reading about falconry as a boy of eight, Martin Scuffins trained his first bird - a Muscovy duck with height anxiety. Later when he trained a Suffolk Hen to perch on his hand he distinctly remembers his father saying, "Martin the thought of one of our hens diving on prey from one thousand feet is a frightening one."

Martin went on to study Biology and work in Natural Resource Management, and today runs a specialised wildlife shelter in Ballarat, "Hawk Haven" where he cares for injured eagles, hawks, falcons and owls. He supports this passion with his talents as a wildlife artist and musician.

Birds of prey have very sharp talons (3 toes forward and one back) to seize and carry away their prey, hooked beaks and good eyesight. They have reverse sexual dimorphism, ie., the female is larger than the male. The Goshawk female is twice as large as the male. Martin thinks an explanation for this might be that while the female is breeding, the male hunts to support her and the small chicks, but as the chicks grow it is the female that takes over the hunting role and, being a bigger bird, it is capable of bringing home larger prey for the growing family.

Eagles and Hawks have light coloured eyes, a single nostril on either side of the beak in line with the eye and they poo backwards. They are not built for speed but for acceleration and slow soaring. They are effective nest builders – Wedge-tailed Eagles can build up to three nests in a territory and use them alternately, perhaps to avoid parasite build-up in the nest. A Wedge-tailed Eagle has to be more than eight years old to achieve the dark colour and can live 10 -15 years in the wild; in Healesville sanctuary one bird lived to be 40+ years old.

Falcons and Kestrels have dark eyes, a tooth in their upper beak to tear at prey, and a baffle in their nostrils to control the airflow when they are flying at great speeds. They drop their poo straight down. They have a dark patch below the eye to reduce the glare and are lazy nest builders. They lay eggs directly on a rock ledge or in an abandoned nest. Peregrines on a building (nearest thing to a rock ledge) in Sturt Street, Ballarat, disappeared after a local supermarket poisoned sparrows.

Some special adaptations include:

Brown Goshawks hunt in crowded forests so need a very good rudder.
The fringe on the edge of Barn Owl feathers acts as a silencer.
A Wedge-tailed Eagles' eyesight is many times better than ours and they can also use ultra-violet vision which enables them to see where animals have made tracks.

As far back as 3000BC Chinese gave falcons as gifts. Falconry began in 1700BC and peaked in the Middle Ages. It was the equivalent of football in its day. A knave could only own a kestrel; yeomen had Goshawks; priests had Sparrowhawks; and the King kept Eagles. The art of falconry continued through the centuries until gunpowder came into use and man and bird became competitors - birds began to be eliminated as potential predators. In Australia there once was a Society for Eagle and Tiger Elimination. 120,000 bounties were paid out for heads, eggs or talons. Wedge-tailed Eagles were subject to bounties as late as the 1960's. The 1975 Wildlife Act protected them when their effect on stock was scientifically proven to be minimal.

You have to be hard hearted in this job. Barbed-wire, fences, power lines and cars have the greatest impact on these birds causing horrendous injuries. A Peregrine Falcon hit a power line with such force and speed, its wing was found five metres away. Birds of prey have an air sack in their humerus (wing) bone, which is crucial to their mobility, and injuries to wings often mean the birds have to be destroyed. One above-average-sized young Australian Hobby was operated on as Martin thought it deserved a chance. After a \$300 operation to insert a pin in its wing, it pulled it out and had to be euthanased. A Wedge-tailed Eagle with an injured humerus, radius and ulna was three weeks on the ground but as fat as a pudding living on dead sheep etc. It was euthanased. A Little Eagle with head injuries had cortisone and falcon training, and appeared to be progressing well when, 2 months later, it went blind in one eye and had to be destroyed.

The average length of stay at the shelter is 30 days – Martin is proud of that. These birds are athletes and they need their fitness to be restored if they are to survive. Martin uses falconry techniques to exercise injured birds. He releases birds when they can hunt successfully and they eventually become independent. Often eyesight is affected by head injuries. He drags mice across their line of vision to test this.

Peregrine Falcons are hated by pigeon racers in Tasmania – the falcons are 50% less likely to survive there. Pigeon breast is good high octane

falcon food and is often used as feed for recovering birds. There are 250 known and banded pairs – probably about half the existing population. They can't count – you can place extra young in a nest with same age chicks and they will be raised. They remember their young for quite a long time and will welcome them back after a month or two away.

Brown Goshawks are crazy to train and Collared Sparrowhawks, the smallest bird of prey, are even crazier. You can't train owls – they are too dumb. Martin once hand raised a Boo-book Owl and to exercise it he would take it out at night, following with a torch – after 6 months it was released. Martin doesn't want humans to imprint on the birds – to avoid this he feeds them through a hole using a bird puppet.

P.S. PLEASE use cardboard boxes to house injured animals - injured birds can be irreparably damaged in wire cages*. Wildlife shelters are privately funded and donations are always welcome.

*A panicking bird in a wire cage invariably results in severe feather damage, which could take up to 2 years in captivity to replace. Birds cannot fly properly in this state – disastrous for a bird of prey. The normal moult replaces only one or two feathers at a time. [-Ed.]

Extra Event – FIRST MEETING

“Connecting Country” – the biodiversity blueprint project

“We invite you to become part of Connecting Country by sharing your local knowledge of your land with us. Maps of your area will be provided. We'd like to know what you've done and what more could be done to restore habitat in your patch.”

“Would you like to take part in ongoing flora and fauna surveys of your land? Gain access to advice on how you could care for your country? Link with other people across Mt Alexander Shire to bring back the bush?”

Saturday 12th April, open between 10am until 1pm Ray Bradfield Room, Victory Park, Castlemaine. - morning tea from 10am, BBQ (including vegetarian) from 11.30am

**For enquiries, please phone Julie von Platen 5476 4144
or Marie Jones 5472 2892**

Do Not Trust Butterfly Collectors!

(myself not included! - Tony Morton)

Extract from Volume 6 of *Monographs on Australian Lepidoptera* - Biology of Australian Butterflies, Chapter 1 (The History of Australian Butterfly Research and Collecting, by M.S. Moulds – pp. 16 and 17)

"In the collections of the Australian Museum, Museum of Victoria and South Australian Museum there are many butterfly specimens bearing bright yellow labels on which is printed 'passed through C.W. Wyatt Theft Coll. 1946-1947'. Wyatt was a very likeable person, a Cambridge graduate, three times British ski champion, well-known athlete and mountaineer, he spoke seven languages, was a renowned artist and author, and a naturalist with a passion for butterfly collecting. He first came to Australia in December 1936 staying just on a year. He returned two years later, arriving the day war was declared (3rd September 1939) and served in both Australia and New Guinea in a number of capacities for the RAAF and the British Army. At every opportunity he collected butterflies and soon became well known amongst the Australian entomological community (Wyatt 1955). Although he made an excellent collection of Australian butterflies, he was tempted, before his return to England in late 1946, to supplement his collection with museum specimens. Having gained the trust of museum officials and having gained a knowledge of museum security, he methodically set about stealing rarities. These he sent to England shortly before he departed Australia by ship. Following his arrival in England in February 1947 he was interviewed by police at his home in Farnham, Surrey. The theft and his conviction drew much media attention both in Australia and England. The theft was first noticed by A. N. Burns, then Curator of the National Museum of Victoria, and phone calls to the Australian museum and the South Australian Museum soon confirmed similar thefts from their collections. Wyatt took over 1600 specimens, destroying their data labels and replacing them with his own, employing two pseudonyms, 'G.Purcell' and 'JB'. The specimens were returned to the South Australian Museum where the curators attempted to sort them. Wyatt was fined £100* for his efforts but despite this episode he retained his enthusiasm for butterfly collecting until he died in a plane crash in Guatemala in 1975 at the age of 66."

* The original 'slap on the wrist'??

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

April 2008

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Broadways, 7 Wheeler Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

Fri Apr 11. Carol Hall (Ballarat FNC) – Topic "Canyons of the Colorado Plateau"

Sat Apr 12. **Field trip: Maryborough Area.** (Postponed last month due to Total Fire Ban) Depart from opposite the motel in Duke St at 1.30pm sharp. BYO afternoon tea. Leader : Gary Cheers, Ph 5461 2970

Fri May 9. Sid Cowling on wetlands.

Sat May 10. **Field trip: Railway Dam (Tunnel Hill) and Crocodile Reservoir (Fryerstown).** Leader : Rita Mills.

Subscriptions for 2008

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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